

# *The* Historian

*of Hancock County*

**Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi**

**JUNE 1996**

## JUNE HAPPENING

The June luncheon meeting is set for Thursday, June 20 at the Lobrano House, 108 Cue Street, Bay St. Louis.

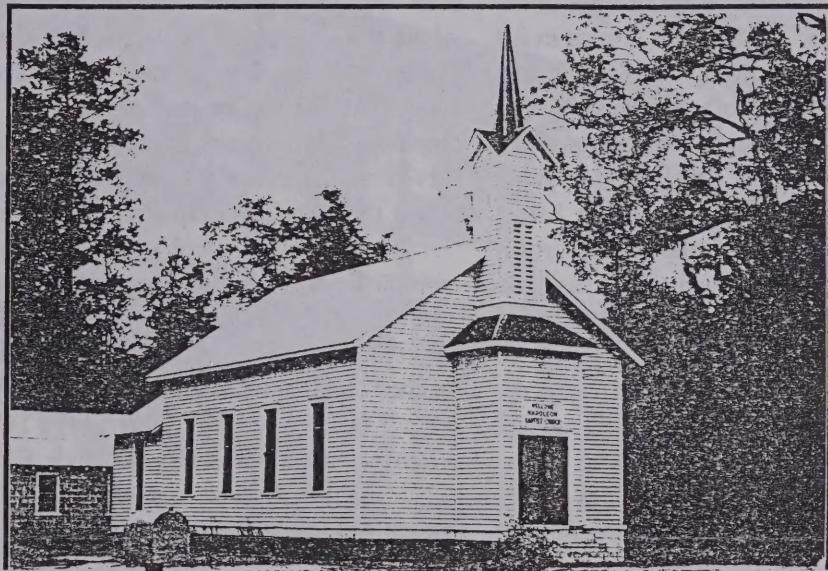
Guest speaker will be Sally K. Reeves, Archivist of the Office of the New Orleans Office of Notarial Records, who will discuss historical resources in her office's collections, including those linking New Orleans regional and family histories to those of Hancock County.

For reservations, at \$5, call 467-4090 no later than June 18.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The dedication of the new Charles Gray Gallery at the Lobrano House on May 23rd was a record breaker. We had 103 guests and members for lunch. Needless to say, it was a buffet, but what a buffet it was! Maealys Swartzendruber and her ladies provided, prepared and presented the lunch superbly. It is so great to have a proper kitchen.

Only five years ago we had to fetch a pitcher of water from a faucet in the yard to make a cup of tea and afterward we had to carry the dirty dishes across the street to Ruth's Bakery to wash them. Thank you one and all.



**NAPOLEON BAPTIST CHURCH**

Photo courtesy of Stennis Space Center

## NAPOLEON

Napoleon Bonaparte never set foot in Hancock County, but enough people believed his brother did to give his name to a small community on the Pearl River.

Today there are no traces of the Napoleon community whose last inhabitants were relocated when NASA enclosed its land in the buffer zone. A narrow lonely road leads from Highway 607 through the site of Napoleon, ending at a boat launch on the Pearl River. But Napoleon has an exotic history, told and retold by the county's old-timers.

The area was first recorded as

a Spanish land grant to Simon Favre in 1798. Before the Civil War, I.S. Ives and Frandes Leech, using slave labor, ran a "naval store," an operation involving chipping, boxing and dipping gum of pine trees too young for the sawmills. After Emancipation, the labor in naval stores continued to be mostly black turpentine workers whose living standards were lower than other lumber employees. They lived apart from agricultural and sawmill towns in small villages whose contacts were limited to the commissary, the boss, the church and their families.

(Continued on page 2)

## (NAPOLEON from page 1)

By 1852, one traveler observed that attempts over the previous 30 years to build a town on the site were unsuccessful. One village of several families had a distillery of "spirits of turpentine and camphine" but the place was abandoned. "The buildings are fast going to decay and are unoccupied," wrote L.C. Wailes in his diary for 15 August 1852. "There are traces of extensive brick-yards, the brick for the construction of Fort Pike, many years earlier, having been made here."

Wailes, a roving reporter rather than a historian, didn't say how Napoleon got its name, but noted that would-be settlers wanted to call it "Pearltown, and more recently under the former name," Napoleon.

A brother of Napoleon Bonaparte - either Jerome or Joseph depending on who tells the tale - once camped on the banks of the Pearl River as part of a secret scheme to free his brother from prison on Saint Helena.

After his surrender and banishment in 1814, a number of plots were afoot to rescue Napoleon. One called for moving him to New Orleans where locals were building a house at 500 Chartres Street, still known today as the Napoleon House. Napoleon urged his British captors to free him, offering to go to the United States, but the British refused. The alternative was escape.

His brother Joseph (Author's note: This is my choice of would-be rescuer since he was known to have visited the United States while Jerome was not.) and a cadre of supporters left the coast of France on a cargo ship. In

Joseph's possession was \$80,000 in gold to finance Napoleon's escape. Warned by friends to avoid the Gulf of Mexico, the Rigolets, Lake Pontchartrain - indeed all the waters in the area - because of infestation by pirates, the group hid by day and traveled by night. They made their way to the area of present-day Waveland where they were met by Jeremiah Henley, a French supporter who had aided France in its colonial disputes with Spain, and also served in Napoleon's army, surviving the Russian campaign.

Henley met Joseph's group with mules and supplies for a trip to a prepared hiding place on the banks of the Pearl. They reached their hideout in a thicket some 1,000 feet east of the river. When a mule brayed, it was killed and buried lest suspicious pirates lurking in the area hear it a second time.

True to many Mississippi legends, this one also has buried treasure. Joseph, realizing that a large sum could tempt members of his retinue, slipped away from them one dark night and buried his gold. "Up to this day, no one knows whether they ever came back for it," wrote "Grandpa" Thigpen in true Coast melodramatic fashion.

Departing their hideout on the darkest night, evading pirate ships in fog and heavy rain, Joseph's group left in a rowboat.

Upon arriving in New Orleans, Bonaparte found no enthusiasm for sheltering his famous (or infamous) brother, so he gave up his plan and returned to France.

Joseph represented France in discussions with the British envoy prior to the 1802 Treaty of

Amiens. By 1806 Napoleon had installed him as King of Naples, and in 1808 King of Spain. He fled Spain in 1813 and in 1814, after his brother's surrender, he is known to have gone to the United States. In 1830, he was pleading the cause of the Duke of Reichstadt for the French throne. He later visited England, and lived in Genoa and Florence, where he died in 1844.

His brother Napoleon died in 1821 at age 52, never having visited America. But who knows what future historians will uncover?

(Sources: ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, 1959 edition; S.G. "Grandpa" Thigpen, Sr., NAPOLEON COMMUNITY TOOK EMPEROR'S BROTHER'S NAME; SOUTH MISSISSIPPI in 1852: SOME SELECTIONS FROM THE JOURNAL OF BENJAMIN L.C. WAILES, Journal of Miss. History, Vol. XVIII, Jan. 1956; Hickman, Nollie W., "Black Labor in Forest Industries in the Piney Woods, 1840-1933," in Polk, Noel, ed., MISSISSIPPI'S PINEY WOODS.)

Edith Back

## THE HENLEY CONNECTION

Grandpa Thigpen's account gives further details of the role of Jeremiah Henley in supporting the French cause.

"Jeremiah was sympathetic with, and had aided the French in their colonial arguments with Spain and as a result had his claim on Pearl River confirmed... Much information not recorded in history books has come down to us through the Henley family.



THE SPANISH CUSTOMS HOUSE  
706 S. BEACH BOULEVARD, BAY ST. LOUIS, MISSISSIPPI

The National Register of Historic Places #72 assigns a "Primary Significance" rating to this building and describes it as follows:

"Spanish Customs House Ca. 1790. 2 1/2-story 5x2-bay stucco over brick dwelling with gable roof and 2-tiered gallery on 4 sides. Original kitchen building in rear."

This simple two story pink cottage, popularly known as the "Spanish Custom House", is probably the oldest building in Bay Saint Louis. A date of 1787 is inscribed in the brickwork and it is very likely the date of construction. The building is solid brick with a stucco finish and the gallery originally encompassed all four sides on both levels. The plan arrangement, proportion and detail all combine to date this delightful house from the Spanish period before any influences from England or the new United States had an effect on popular taste. (From "Architectural Influences 1780-1970" by Fred Wagner, Architect, A.I.A.)

# SNEAK PREVIEW

Thursday, June 27, 1996  
10:00 A.M.

Bay St. Louis Depot  
1928 Railroad Avenue

You're invited to a special sneak preview  
of the restoration of  
the historic depot prior to the arrival  
of the Gulf Coast Ltd.  
that will run twice daily through  
Bay St. Louis

"In 1811 Jeremiah Henley with a group of French partisans joined with some French volunteers to aid Napoleon in his war against Russia.

"They sailed for France in time to be integrated into the French army that was to invade Russia. They were soldiers in Napoleon's Grand Army that marched to Moscow, the Russian Capital. They stayed in Moscow less than two months. In the terrible march back to France in the cold and snow of a Russian winter, many of these soldiers from America were among those who lost their lives from cold and disease.

"My grandmother told me of Jeremiah Henley's description of this retreat from Moscow when the snow along the line of march was dyed red by the bleeding feet of the soldiers. Out of the 500,000 soldiers who went to Moscow, Jeremiah was one of the very few who returned.

"He had not been back very long before French agents contacted him again because of his known sympathies for France and asked he organize a party to meet the French conspirators."

(Thigpen, *op. cit.*)

## NEW FEATURE

With this issue, we introduce the first of Charles Gray's presentations of noteworthy and historic buildings in Hancock County.



JOSEPH BONAPARTE

Our June insert depicts the oldest standing building in the county built in 1787. Others will be included in future news letters.

A bit of beach lore about this month's building: its neighbors had different ways of signaling the noon lunch break to children on the beach.

Dr. S. Fossier blew his horn.

Mrs. Matilde Beyer waved a towel.

Grandma Beyer next door hung an Indian blanket over the railing.

Mr. H. C. Glover whistled.

Mr. Korndorffer rang a cow bell.

## LOBRANO HOUSE HOURS

MON. 8 to 4 or by  
TUE. 8 to 4 appointment  
THU. 8 to 4

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